

Statement of David Brock
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"MEDIA BIAS AND THE FUTURE OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS" Forum
5/24/05

Just over a year ago, we created Media Matters for America in order to monitor and correct conservative misinformation appearing in the American news media. In our short existence, we have published on our web site nearly two thousand analyses of incidents of that misinformation being spread through the media. As I'm sure you know, conservatives have an extraordinarily effective infrastructure to disseminate their talking points and make their arguments, including talk radio, newspapers like the New York Post and Washington Times, and the Fox News Channel. These outlets are supported by a network of conservative think tanks and advocacy groups who work to coordinate the conservative message. We have found, and continue to document on a daily basis, that conservatives continue to be highly successful in convincing mainstream news outlets to pass conservative talking points and misinformation on to their readers, viewers, and listeners.

This is a story that has been told many times before. But the critical point for our discussion here today is not merely that conservatives are able to sing in a single, harmonious voice, whether they are telling the truth or not – and all too often they are not. Of even greater concern is that they and the White House have undertaken a sustained assault not only on particular news outlets whose praise of the president they find insufficiently fulsome or whose willingness to pass on conservative propaganda they find insufficiently enthusiastic, but on the very idea of an independent press.

This goes far beyond the administration's tight message control or its elaborately staged photo opportunities. Those are merely heightened, and particularly skillful, versions of the attempts made by every administration to obtain the most favorable coverage possible.

Instead, this administration has attacked the legitimacy of the press as arbiters of fact who have the ability, and the responsibility, to wade through political rhetoric and guide citizens to the truth. As I have argued before, the conservatives' goal appears to be for us to reach a point where there are blue state facts and red state facts, where there is simply no objective truth at all.

Vigorous ideological competition is one of the cornerstones of any democratic system. But that competition must be carried out on a foundation of shared facts and with independent arbiters who can lead the public through competing arguments toward the truth. It is this foundation that conservatives are attempting to destroy.

And there is evidence that they are succeeding. A University of Maryland poll just before the 2004 election showed that 47% of Bush supporters held the mistaken belief that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, while a further 25% thought he had a major weapons program. In other words, only one in four Bush supporters understand, or is willing to acknowledge, the truth about Iraq.

An earlier University of Maryland poll dissected a series of misperceptions people had about Iraq – that we had found evidence of links between Saddam and Al Qaeda, that WMD had

been found, and that world opinion supported the war. They found that those most likely to hold these misperceptions were people who cited Fox News as their primary source of news. 80% of Fox News viewers had one or more of these misperceptions. And the people who were the least likely to hold a misperception, those who were most accurate in their knowledge about the Iraq war? Those who said their primary source of news was NPR or PBS.

So perhaps we should not be surprised that the White House has undertaken to turn public broadcasting into just one more mouthpiece of the Bush administration and the conservative movement. The ideologues the administration installed at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting have begun working to bring public broadcasting more in line with their particular vision, creating conservative shows and monitoring PBS programs for alleged “bias.”

I would not argue that public broadcasting’s news coverage is always perfect in every way. We at Media Matters have criticized both PBS and NPR on occasion, and will probably do so in the future. But conservatives have targeted public broadcasting for the same reason they have targeted the federal judiciary. It is precisely because public broadcasting is independent and does bring its viewers and listeners the truth, that it so offends conservatives.

That is why Media Matters has launched a project called “Hands Off Public Broadcasting,” which can be found at www.handsoffpublicbroadcasting.org. The project offers information, analysis, and ways for Americans to organize to protect their local PBS and NPR stations and programming from political influence.

This effort is about more than just public broadcasting; it is about the kind of news media Americans want and deserve. As we have seen, the White House and its allies will seize any opportunity to blame reporters for their problems of their own making and intimidate the press into submission. When the administration spends taxpayer dollars to pay pundits to tout their programs; when it creates fake news segments aired on local news to unsuspecting viewers; when the Social Security administration is forced to become yet another propaganda arm of the White House; when journalists are berated and threatened by administration officials for doing their jobs, then democracy itself is under assault.

There is a reason that the Founding Fathers put the freedom of the press in the First Amendment to the Constitution alongside freedom of speech and freedom of religion. They understood that without an independent, vigorous, critical press, democracy is simply impossible. No political party will ever be fully satisfied with everything it reads and sees in the news media. But when those in power attempt to destroy the very idea of an independent press, to convince all Americans to trust no voices except those whose opinions precisely match their own, to undermine our belief that a verifiable truth exists, then people of good will, no matter their ideology, have a responsibility to stand up and do something about it.